

Change in real time: Bahrain and the Global Award for Women Advancement

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Bahrain's Supreme Council for Women has laid the foundations for a better society, explains Hala Al Ansari.



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To bring about change requires two things: a clear vision of what needs to be achieved, and the political will to do it. In the Kingdom of Bahrain, in the Arabian Gulf, we have long made support of women's rights a core national priority.

We recognise that social justice and gender parity provide a fundamental basis for securing sustainable prosperity and have set ourselves apart as a pioneer of women's advancement in the Middle East.

Policies targeting the gender gap have elevated the status of women in Bahrain, further enabled their participation in society and ensured they are fully integrated in the national development process.

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The concrete outcomes of these initiatives are clear: women now make up 49 per cent of public sector employees, 34 per cent in the private sector, with women as entrepreneurs holding 47 per cent of active commercial registrations; in addition to comprising 57 per cent of lawyers, 64 per cent of doctors, and 73 per cent of educators in Bahrain.

The Kingdom of Bahrain was able to close the gender gap in key indicators such as enrolment in all stages of education, as well as ranking top MENA wide in economic participation and opportunities, and score high in indicators such as closing the gender wage gap for similar work, estimated income, according to 2017 Annual Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF).

In Bahrain, we have put women at the centre of designing strategies and programmes overcoming gender barriers. The Supreme Council for Women (SCW) was established in August 2001 following a Royal Decree to provide a central strategic body and national reference for women's affairs.

Chaired by Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, the Wife of His Majesty the King of Bahrain, the SCW has translated the Kingdom's strategic aspirations into concrete national initiatives, targeting key partnerships to help build a more competitive and sustainable society for Bahrain.

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This was achieved by advancing women's participation through the development of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Bahraini Women, across five major pillars, which include, family stability, equal opportunities, life-long learning, quality of life and aspiring to be a centre of expertise.

The SCW has also championed the development of the National Model for Mainstreaming Women's Needs in Development as one of its main mechanisms to promote equal opportunities for women and men , further developing a new culture supportive of gender balance in all disciplines, which have been aligned on common ground, as governance frameworks of action, with the government's action plan and National Budgets.

As part of its mandate, the SCW has run political empowerment and professional training programs, launched the first female-focused business incubator established in the Arab world, and managed

financial assistance funds to support women running micro-businesses and SMEs.

Bahraini women have achieved impressive results in the pursuit of gender equality – it's now time for a change to the “empowerment” conversation in the Kingdom. We are now looking to the further “advancement” of women in society to keep up the positive momentum and ensure we continue breaking down barriers for women and girls to secure positive and lasting change in the long run.

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To do so requires a renewed commitment from all. While mindful of the challenges and enduring obstacles, we are confident that our national commitment sets the stage for untapped potential. In Bahrain, efforts in the field of women's advancement are grounded in a belief that women and men have equal partnership in building a truly competitive and prosperous nation – we all stand to benefit from.

As we look forward, we plan on sharing more of our experiences globally, so others can stand to learn from our experiences. We have recently launched the Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa Global Award for Women Empowerment in partnership with UN Women after the outstanding success of the local edition over the past 10 years as part of Bahrain's efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals on Gender Equality.

Four \$100,000 awards will be presented every three years to one individual, one member of the public sector, a private sector representative, and one civil society organization as we look to encourage and celebrate national, regional and international efforts aimed at advancing women and enhancing their role in sustainable development.

As an international community, we have all committed to transforming the world by 2030 through the Sustainable Development Goals – the achievement of Gender Equality is a crucial part of this effort.

Through the SCW, we have laid the foundations for a better society at home; and through the Global Award for Women Empowerment, we will recognise our partners abroad, who are working to create a better world for future generations to come.

About the author

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